

Organising IMC Roles and Functions in the Business-to-Business Network Environment.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of globalisation firms are finding it increasingly difficult to determine a meaningful point of differentiation and obtain a competitive advantage (Philippidis and Hubbard, 2003). This fact has led to questioning the effectiveness of the traditional perspective of marketing, and investigation into how marketing can evolve to remain relevant in the ever more complex markets of the twenty first century (see Anderson, 2001; Gronroos, 2004). As a relatively new stream of theory, there have been few empirical studies published to assist managers and researchers' understanding of IMC, despite a growing body of conceptual work that espouses its virtues (Low, 2000). As a result, there remains little consensus on IMC's definitional boundaries, and a real lack of agreement in its operational measurement (Pickton and Hartley, 1998). A review of literature suggests that the definitional boundaries of the IMC concept range in scope. The narrow perspective considers IMC as the integration of promotional tools to receive maximum impact from minimum investment (Low, 2000). In contrast, the broader perspective suggests that integration of all business operations is required to realise IMC objectives and achieve competitive advantage (Pickton and Hartley, 1998; Stewart, 1996). Efforts to identify the conceptual boundaries of IMC are further complicated by the fact that studies have primarily focused on firms operating in consumer markets. Given that the impacts of globalisation also extend to business-to-business markets, it is necessary to consider the potential role and machinations of IMC within business-to-business dealings (Garber and Dotson, 2002; Kitchen and Schultz, 2003).

Marketing communications in the 'traditional marketing mix' was viewed primarily as a one-way information mechanism by which the marketer attempted to persuade the target consumer audience of the benefits of the firm's products (Anderson, 2001). Traditionally, decisions regarding communication messages were the responsibility of in-house or external agencies, and dissemination of these messages was the role of sales personnel (Anderson, 2001). Implementation of an IMC approach in contemporary business markets requires a redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of those involved in communications and consideration given to new structures and management systems (Anderson, 2001; Gronroos, 2004; Pickton and Hartley, 1998). It has been noted that the adoption of the IMC concept requires total organisational commitment (Gronroos, 2004), but with the growth in the prevalence and importance of industry networks (and other network arrangements) to the competitive process, the need for IMC concepts to be adopted between firms requires the development of open and multi-directional communication between networking firms. Open and multidirectional communications channels means that marketers are no longer confined to their own marketing departments to fulfil traditional roles, rather all personnel that come in contact with customers/suppliers/competitors act as pseudo-marketers fulfilling roles in communication and relationship development (Gronroos, 2004). To successfully internalise these new responsibilities and fulfil their new role, all communicators

must be educated of the benefits of an IMC approach and provided with the required information and knowledge to facilitate their efforts in developing stakeholder relations (Proctor and Kitchen, 2002; Stewart, 1996). To ensure consistency in the messages conveyed to stakeholders all communicators must have a shared understanding of the firm's mission, values, objectives and product offerings (Anderson, 2001; Stewart, 1996). The absence of this understanding may result in communication inconsistencies that dilute IMC effectiveness (Rancchod, Gurau and Lace, 2002).

Substantial internal marketing and dissemination of organisational wide information is necessary to stimulate and enable the required change in behaviour toward a commitment to IMC (Pickton and Hartley, 1998). Rather than forcing company-wide change through the introduction of new structures, Stewart (1996) suggests that commitment to IMC be nurtured through the development of new relationships, roles and responsibilities from which new structures will naturally evolve (Gronroos, 2004; Pickton and Hartley, 1998). The literature proposes that successful IMC requires the acceptance of all those in the firm who have a role as pseudo-marketers and the responsibility of managing its multiple-stakeholder relations. This research focuses on the identification of the roles required to organise the IMC program of the Tasmanian Light Shipbuilding Network (TLSN). The TLSN is a group of eleven firms that through collaboration and combined marketing efforts became one of Australia's most internationally competitive industry networks (Industry Audit, 1998).

THE CASE OF THE TASMANIAN LIGHT SHIPBUILDING NETWORK.

The origin of the TLSN can be traced back to 1984, and the development of the world's first aluminium welding technology by the innovative firm International Catamarans (Incat). Some years before, Incat's managing director Robert Clifford, had identified an opportunity to construct high quality fast ferries for the world market, but required the assistance of a number of 'maritime network friends' to help develop the lightweight technology needed to construct such a vessel. The integration of a number of different product lines from the network members into Incat's lightweight vessels (i.e. life raft equipment, fire safety equipment, lightweight fit-outs, innovative engineering products etc) became central to the network's international success. Over time, the integration of product lines and marketing programs enabled the network to forge a dominant position in the global market for fast ferries, with the TLSN capturing 40 percent of the world's market for fast ferries and the associated technologies (Wickham and Hall, 2006). The integrated marketing program developed by the network also delivered benefits for the individual firms, with each managing to forge their own internationally distinct reputations and export revenues (independent of those generated by their Incat connections) by the year 2000.

METHOD

This research comprised a comprehensive series of semi-structured interviews with all of the key informants within the TLSN and the state government during the period 1977 to 2002. Interviews were conducted with each of Tasmania's state Premiers, the managing directors of the TLSN firms, and the heads of government departments and agencies during the TLSN's formation. In total 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. The interview questions posed to the participants were derived from an extensive collection and analysis of historical data pertaining to the TLSN's development. As such, the interviews contained both standardised interview questions (i.e. common to all informants) and specific interview questions (i.e. aimed at the key informants' specific involvement in the TLSN's history), and were formulated to elicit the primary data required to answer the research questions posed in this inquiry. Both the standardised and specific interview questions were formulated to facilitate the aggregation, analysis, triangulation, and validation of information, and enabled the researcher to interrogate the evidence gathered from other sources. These questions were designed to cover the necessary issues, but were framed in an open-ended manner, to allow the interviewees sufficient latitude for introspection and open reporting of their own perspectives.

This collection of primary data using a semi-structured interview method allowed the informants to tell their own story in their own way, thereby allowing the researcher direct access to the experience of the case (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). These individualised recollections aid to strengthen the inquiry by counteracting the bias that may exist in the secondary documents (Burgess, 1982), by adding matters of fact or detail that may only be recorded in individual memory (Samuel, 1982), and by giving voice to those not usually heard (Fontana and Frey, 1994). The semi-structured interviews assisted this inquiry in each of these areas, as they enabled the researcher to access facets of the case that would not have been available by any other data gathering technique.

The interpretation of the data, and the verification of the conclusions, were facilitated by the use of the QSR NUD*IST software package. In the method literature, it has been emphasised that computer software programs such as QSR NUD*IST, are of significant value in qualitative analysis and any subsequent theory building (Kelle, 1995; Richards and Richards, 1995; Weitzman and Miles, 1995). The nodes initially generated from the literature review formed an index system that appears as the bolded Nodes 1 through 6 in the sample 'stem and leaf' depiction of concepts shown in Figure 1. The primary interview transcripts were then scrutinised for significant terms, events, and issues located therein according to units of observation, and coded according to the nodes in the index system. Where it was appropriate, data were allocated to more than one node for analysis. Again using the QSR NUD*IST software, the contents of each of the initial index nodes were then reviewed to identify common themes that arose in the primary interview data. Subsequently, additional nodes (see sample Nodes 1.1, 1.2 etc. Figure 1) were then established to categorise the results of the analysis of Nodes 1 through 6.

Figure 1: A Sample of the Stem-and leaf Node Categories.

Node 1	Personal Selling
Node 1.1	IMC Champion
Node 1.2	TLSN Member Roles
Node 1.3	Government Lobbying/Government
Node 2	Public Relations
Node 2.3	Government Lobbying/Government
Node 3	Sales Promotion
Node 3.1	IMC Champion
Node 3.2	TLSN Member Roles
Node 3.3	Government Lobbying/Government
Node 4	Advertising
Node 4.1	TLSN Member Roles
Node 4.2	Government Lobbying/Government
Node 5	Electronic/Internet
Node 6	Direct Marketing

In order to facilitate the theory building process later in the research process, memos were maintained about the data, their categories, and the relationships between them as they emerged. Designed to store and organise ideas about the data, they were integrated into the analytic process. Wilson suggests that memos assist in the development of theory in five important ways:

1. They require that you move your thinking about the idea to a conceptual level.
2. They summarise the properties of each category so that you can begin to construct operational definitions.
3. They summarise propositions about relationships between categories and their propositions.
4. They begin to integrate categories with networks of other categories.
5. They relate your analysis to other theories (1985: 420).

QSR NUD*IST has a facility for the creation and retention of such memos for later consideration and analysis. Utilising the memo capability within the QSR NUD*IST package, memo reports were generated by the software during ‘stage two’ coding. From these reports, the interaction between the parties’ became clearer, the context of the various phenomena surfaced, causes and effects were revealed, and motivations were exposed. The themes emanating from the ‘second round’ coding form the basis of the discussion section that follows.

DISCUSSION.

Our research highlighted three distinct roles that supported the internationally effective IMC functions of the TLSN. Specifically, these roles included an ‘IMC Champion’, ‘Network Ambassadors’, and ‘Government Lobbyists’. The first key role identified was that of the IMC Champion. This role was adopted by a single member of the TLSN, and undertook the responsibilities associated with ‘information gathering and dissemination’ and the coordination of IMC activities throughout the network. This individual was the first to recognise the potential

benefits of an IMC campaign for the network, and actively sought to realise them through a number of key activities:

I went to Japan to sell a product ... All I saw was the mast maker arguing with the sail maker who was arguing with the designer and this is our own people. The New Zealanders came in, dressed in the jackets and ties, totally professional with what they were doing, totally supporting each other and took the market out of Australia – just took it away, overnight virtually (Managing Director B. Personal Interview, 2002).

So, when I got back to Hobart I thought it would be a good idea to set up some form of network so that I knew what the other industries did when I went away, or I sent something away to publicise their capability – especially those that have been working with fast ferries. So, I went around every managing director of the companies that I knew were involved in this sort of work and put the idea to them that we form a network so that if any of us go overseas that we can transfer information. Out of that grew the Tasmanian Maritime Network (Managing Director B. Personal Interview, 2002).

Specifically, the IMC Champion undertook measures to collect and record any information that he deemed relevant to the firms within the TLSN. As the IMC Champion was also the managing director of the network's main training centre, he was also in a position to understand each of the network's businesses and their likely information requirements:

Certainly, having dealt with these guys for a number of years you get to know their businesses in some detail. Having this insight meant being able to collect and reject information as it became available to me. The network meetings also lit the way a bit – the guys were able to tell me what they would like to have after a while, instead of me just showing up with stuff and saying “hey, would this be useful to you?” (Managing Director B. Personal Interview, 2002).

The IMC Champion also sought to integrate the marketing functions performed by individual network firms such that duplication between then the individual firms was minimised, and that the TLSN presented a consistent message to their common markets. In order to achieve this, the IMC Champion undertook the responsibility to analyse each individual firm's marketing strategies and present his IMC recommendations at specially organised TLSN meetings. The IMC Champion also undertook measures to facilitate the process of implementing the IMC activities voted upon at these meetings, essentially coordinating the design and production of information packs, press releases, and uniforms for network representatives when visiting overseas. As one managing director noted:

Tony exercised a co-ordinating function and he performed the role of ensuring that there was a reasonable similarity in looks and feels of reports and all that sort of thing, because otherwise, if you get trendy professional each doing a report everyone has their own ideas. So ...they have put a stamp on it of uniformity contextually. They have co-ordinated the production of the documents and all that sort of thing (Managing Director A, Personal Interview, 2002).

In terms of organising the IMC functions for the network, the IMC Champion performed both information gathering and boundary spanning activities that served as ‘IMC inputs’ to the process. Without the capability of the network to organise these IMC input functions, the network would have been less able to detect and act upon important environmental information:

Well, we are basically a small firm that has had the benefit of being linked with Incat's growth. We actually don't have the time or money to do the research that Tony has done for us. Without Tony, I'm not sure where our business would be today. (Managing Director G, Personal Interview, 2002).

The IMC Champion also played a major part in coordinating and controlling the network's IMC process. Specifically, the IMC Champion was able to provide information to the network and help analyse what implications arose for the network as a whole, and also for the individual firms therein:

As a group, we were able to come together and say, "this is what we're going to be about", and "this is what we want to achieve". We could then start re-thinking about how our own marketing could benefit from the stuff we'd developed together as a group. (Managing Director E, Personal Interview, 2002).

The second key role identified was that of Network Ambassador. This role was adopted by various network members who sought to promote the benefits of the network's entire product range whenever possible. This meant that each of the network firms needed to be aware of their fellow network member's products and competencies, and were able to act as a referral service when dealing with common customers. The enactment of the Network Ambassadors' role was supported through the production and dissemination of firm-specific literature for each individual firm. As a number of network members commented:

The networking of our firms has been a real benefit to my business. If Mark or Michael go to a trade show on marine fire protection, I can be sure that they have information about my business also. If Mark or Michael introduce extra information in their talks with customers about my business, then we all become winners (Managing Director C. Personal Interview, 2002).

I always make sure that I tell the group if I'm going to a trade show, or going overseas to meet with customers.... It's really important to know what's going on in the network, it can be a real double-edged sword – I mean, if I give out old information that is no good, we all look very ordinary and unprofessional. So I make sure that I have current material, or I don't tend to talk about the network at all (Managing Director A, Personal Interview, 2002).

As such, a communications process that focused on current firm activity underpinned the network's ongoing IMC strategy. Network firm managers were able and willing to disseminate facts concerning other network firm's capabilities, and were acutely aware of the need for it to be consistently applied, accurate, and given in a form that was directly related to their customer's enquiry. The Network Ambassador's role was also adopted by non-network identities, such as state government representatives when they were on overseas trade missions. The government representatives (including the State Premier on occasion) were 'honorary' in nature, and as such had to be kept abreast of the latest information by the network firms:

Probably the main one is [the Tasmanian Government's] representation at a few trade shows in Asia where they went across and represented our products, to get us started and to show that we had real support from people in power. These things are very important to our Asian customers (Managing Director D. Personal Interview, 2002).

The interaction between the IMC Champion and the various Network Ambassadors indicated that the network's IMC processes were based on the

considered management of current information and channel selection. The information disseminated throughout the network (and to state government agents on occasion) by the IMC Champion sought to maximise the currency of the knowledge base held by the various Network Ambassadors. The selection of Network Ambassadors was also considered, with the IMC Champion (along with each of the firms' managing directors) soundly aware of the need for the role to be enacted by credible and/or expert individuals:

The number of people that we can send away on sales promotions is obviously limited. We make sure that we have our best marketing person go to sell our goods, and where we can, the goods of other businesses here. The state government has also been very good with their trade-missions...having the state premier sing our song is a great help, especially in Asian markets. (Managing Director A. Personal Interview, 2002).

In terms of organising the IMC functions throughout the network, The Network Ambassadors' role served as a major component of the TLSN's IMC outputs. Whilst the generation of literature for trade shows was important, it was the face-to-face interaction with customers that network firms indicated sealed most of their international sales. Network Ambassadors (including state government agents on occasion) necessarily dealt with the promotion of maritime products both at the network, and individual firm levels. As such, these individuals were required to remain up-to-date with each network firm's current literature, and be in constant communication with the IMC Champion regarding the planning of upcoming marketing opportunities.

The third key role identified was that of Government Lobbyist. As with the Network Ambassador, the role of Government Lobbyist was adopted by a number of key individuals within the TLSN. The main themes associated with the role concerned the outsourcing of those IMC functions that were beyond the capability of the network firms to provide. As a number of managing directors noted:

The main thing that we are lacking in is marketing internationally. There is no one here with that much experience, we have got a lot of capacity if we're talking about building boats, but we have little ability at marketing our boats, especially as a group... (Managing Director C. Personal Interview, 2002).

So the government, through the Department of State Development, helped us to the Pacific 2000 tradeshow. They helped us with uniforms, backdrops...that kind of thing. We had the ideas ourselves, but we didn't have the contacts, or the time really, to organise everything ourselves. The results were excellent (Managing Director C. Personal Interview, 2002).

The Government Lobbyist focused mainly on marketing issues such as the coordination of tradeshow presentations, the provision of growth-related infrastructure, and the provision of marketing consultancy reports (albeit by state government staff) for each of the network firms. The Government Lobbyist also dealt with issues that required substantial time (rather than just monetary cost) to achieve:

When the network really got going, the government would show up in the form of the Department of State Development. They are good at supporting us in certain ways, but sometimes can't get stuff done as quickly as we'd need. So [name deleted] would use

their direct contact with the Premier's office to get the stuff we needed fast. (Managing Director C. Personal Interview, 2002).

As such, the TLSN firms were able to benefit from the considerable power held by a few individuals within the network. In this case, the two main Government Lobbyists were the managing director of Incat (the state's largest private sector employer) and the TAFE Aluminium Welding School (the leading training institution for aluminium welding technology). Individually, the majority of TLSN firms would have been unable to command the services of federal and state government departments and funding to further the cause of their individual businesses. However, through the use of their marketing meetings, the TLSN firms were able to use the power commanded by their government lobbyists to secure millions of dollars in infrastructural spending, alongside the ongoing trade-show and trade-mission work of the state government.

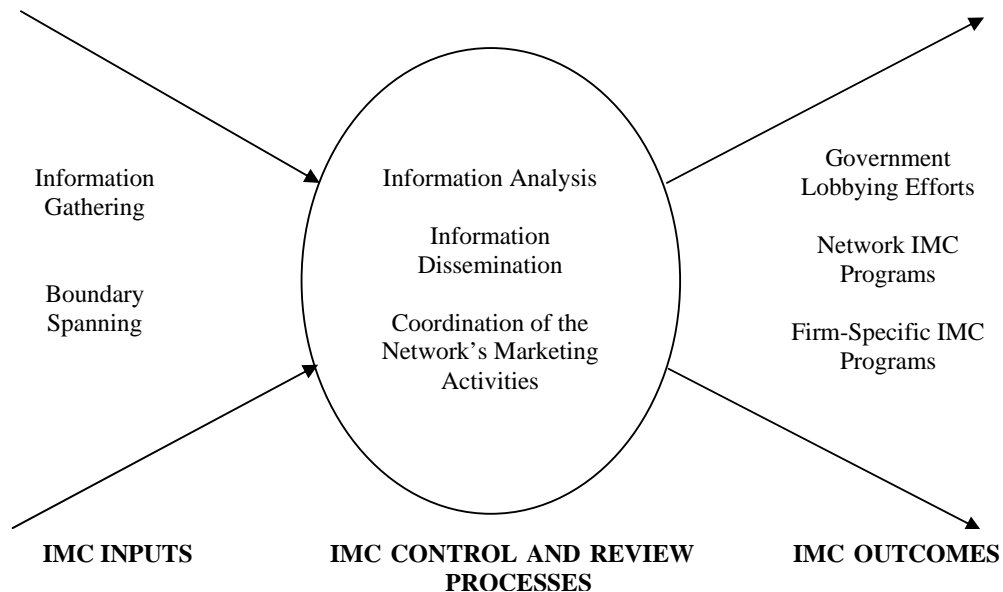
In terms of organising the IMC functions throughout the network, the Government Lobbyist role served to research and highlight the marketing and infrastructural needs of the TLSN to the highest levels of government. The role also served to improve the effectiveness of the network's IMC program to international customers (especially those in the Asian region) by enrolling government officials as spokespeople for the industry:

A lot of the companies and governments around Asia particularly are very impressed with government involvement.... It gives the company status. Obviously we were impressed with the development, officials were impressed with what the TLSN was doing at the time. But, we did play a part in helping to promote [the network] at the international and national level – through government – and when a company is recognised by government as being a first class operation it certainly helps them sell their vessels (State Premier C. Personal interview, 2002)

Figure 2 depicts a model of how the IMC processes of the TLSN were organised to account for the network environment. Unlike the 'traditional' IMC concept, whereby single firms use the various functions to send one-way messages to final consumers, this case indicated that the various IMC processes were organised through a set of distinct inter-firm roles. The IMC Champion role sought to gather pertinent marketing information on behalf of the network, as well as fulfil a boundary-spanning role, whereby the needs of the individual firms were incorporated into the search for data. These data gathering and boundary spanning efforts represented evidence of the need for 'IMC inputs' into the process, but unlike the tradition view of single-firm IMC, the inputs for the TLSN's IMC process was multi-dimensional in that the marketing needs of eleven firms had to be considered simultaneously. The IMC Champion also undertook responsibility to disseminate and analyse the gathered information with the individual network members in order to make sense of the implications. The IMC control process served to define the boundaries of future information requirements, as well as the basis for the IMC strategies adopted by the network. In addition to this, the IMC control process enabled the individual firms to incorporate the principles adopted by the group into their own specific marketing efforts, thereby benefiting from the knowledge and experience of other professional marketers within the industry. With the IMC control process in place, the roles of the Government Lobbyist and Network Ambassadors could be clearly defined by the group. Both of these roles were enacted to serve the best

interests of the network as a whole, and their contribution manifest in government lobbying efforts, the TLSN's combined IMC programs, and the individual firms' IMC programs. As with the traditional 'single-firm' IMC perspective, there is evidence that the process was reiterative, with the information gathering and boundary spanning functions used to gauge the effectiveness of past IMC strategies. Unlike the traditional perspective however, the network IMC process had to account for multiple-firms' marketing requirements, the organisation of multiple network IMC roles, and the needs of an array of different customers.

Figure 2: A Model for the Organisation of IMC in a Business-to-Business Network Environment



CONCLUSION.

This research supports the contention that for IMC to provide a useful platform for differentiation, it must be supported by a number of key roles that undertake information gathering, analysis and dissemination functions. The emergent roles support the extant literature in that it identifies pseudo-marketers (i.e. 'Network Ambassadors' and 'Government Lobbyists') within the industry network, and the need for a generalist 'IMC Champion' to effectively coordinate the efforts of otherwise discretely managed firms. Analysis also highlighted the imperative for all communicators to be cognisant of current network firm activities to further stakeholder relations. This supports Stewart's (1996) suggestion that an IMC focus within the firm can be generated through encouraging a change in behaviour from which appropriate structures for IMC functions will naturally evolve. It is important to note that the functions and roles highlighted here relate specifically to the TLSN thereby restricting their generalisation. However, we feel that this research contributes to our understanding of IMC in the business-to-business context by highlighting the existence of IMC functions and roles within

industry networks, and that further research into how different industries configure their particular IMC functions and roles is required.

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